# PASSING THROUGH THE CHINK IN SNOUT'S WALL:

# DANIEL MORDEN AND *THE DEVIL'S VIOLIN*

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In his paper 'The Elizabethan Actor: A Matter of Temperament', Peter Thomson (2000) describes the changes in the job of acting that took place in Elizabethan England. It was an evolution, he claims, from Presentational Acting (i.e. speaking) to Representational Acting (i.e. speaking and doing). Furthermore, Thomson argues that in spite of this transition, the actor remained both visible and purposeful. The Elizabethan actor took on roles (or functions), rather than characters and maintained a presence of both self (actor) and role (narrative function). During Shakespeare's time the old presentational style of acting began to go out of fashion and began to be

associated with the amateur, unskilled performer (very much as unfashionable melodramatic acting is viewed today), whilst the new, representational style became the mark of the professional. As examples, Thomson refers us to the contrasting performances of the amateur company in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the professional touring troupe of players who visit Elsinore in *Hamlet*, with their suiting of actions to words. By contrast, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Tom Snout, the tinker, 'presents' to us a wall, a wall with a chink, through which the lovers Pyramus and Thisbe exchange sweet-nothings.

According to a recent survey (Haggarty 2004), there are currently in the United Kingdom alone over four hundred individuals purporting to make all or part of their living from telling stories. In addition there are many more non-professionals telling stories within the context of the burgeoning network of storytelling clubs, and still others finding an increasing use for storytelling within their own professional work, such as teachers, librarians, heritage workers, social and health workers and even business and public service managers. The extraordinary growth in storytelling has primarily emerged from the aftermath of the alternative theatre movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, although it is really since the early 1990s that storytelling has enjoyed its most significant growth of interest.

To attempt to define what is meant by storytelling in this context, one must talk principally of tendencies, rather than absolutes, but what is indisputable is that a new breed of solo narrative-based performer has emerged in recent years to form what is openly called 'the storytelling revival'. Common characteristics may include:

- A minimalist approach to set, props and costume, etc.
- A repertoire-based performance (often centered around traditional folktales – at least in the United Kingdom)
- Lack of external director or choreographer
- The centrality of the vocal dynamic in performance, often to the point of denial of physicality (if that indeed were at all possible)

Given that the current revival in storytelling (I'll continue to use the term 'revival' whilst also acknowledging that it is a contested term) has emerged from the countercultural movement of the 60s and 70s with its re-examination and (in some cases) rejection of the established production processes and practices of theatre-making, it is perhaps not surprising that many contemporary storytellers firmly distance their activity from that of acting. This is particularly the case amongst those whose work is more within the area of performance or platform storytelling, as opposed to applied storytelling (for example, the application of storytelling practicesin education, health or social contexts). Rafe Martin comments that:

> Unlike theater, no costumed persons move on a stage amidst literal scenery speaking unchanging dialogue… the story is not so much a performance – a term invested with associations to theater - as a *presentation* or *demonstration* of its own life.
>
> (Martin, 1996, pp.142-3)

By the same token, American academic Carol Birch:

> Plays depict actors talking as if they were behind a wall the audience can see through, often referred to as the fourth wall. Monologues are still presented to an audience by a *persona* who obscures the actual personality of the one who is speaking, even as the audience is addressed directly. Storytelling, as an oral medium, is created when the storyteller's point of view weaves through and around the narrator, the events, the characters, and the responses of the audience. This startling reciprocity sets storytelling apart from theater. (Birch, 1996, p.119)

Daniel Morden speaks specifically from the perspective of the storyteller when he says, "Unlike the actor, a storyteller has to conceive imagery, convert that imagery into language, and communicate his/her vision. Yes, storytelling involves the skills of the performer, but I am not, and never will be an actor" (2002). Another key figure on the British storytelling scene, Hugh Lupton, agrees:

> Actors don't make good storytellers because they learn word for word and give essentially the same performance each time. Storytellers make each performance their own and different. Theatre is a formal experience – the audience and the performer are separated from one another by the proscenium arch. The successful storyteller breaks down the fourth wall. In fact, when things go well, the storyteller disappears, is lost to the listeners, and the material becomes greater than either.
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> (www.spiked-magazine.co.uk/spiked8/lupton.htm, 12.07.04)

However, whilst all these statements say incisive things about storytelling, the restrictive definition of acting that is conjured up here is one that many actors would

not recognize. There are plenty of models of acting that are much closer to the models of storytelling described here that may throw some light upon the contemporary storytelling phenomenon, not least Brecht's model of the epic actor.

Since the early 1980s many storytellers have been working hard to establish traditional storytelling as an adult activity, rather than being seen as a purely children's entertainment and significant progress has been made in this area. One consequence has been for storytellers, ironically, to increasingly adopt the forms and practices of small-scale theatre production, returning to the arts centres and theatres as venues, whilst retaining the essence of the storytelling experience. It has led to a more formalised style of performance that is often referred to by the press as 'theatrical'.

Daniel Morden is a Welsh storyteller, who works internationally in both applied and platform contexts. Over recent years he has received critical acclaim for his highly performative (or theatricalised) storytelling shows with Hugh Lupton, based around a single theme or collection of classical stories (such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*). This approach has given their performances a thematic unity and a necessary formality which is not present in the performances of many storytellers who work spontaneously from a varied repertoire. In effect it could be said to be a move away from the 'concert' towards the 'play'.

It is my suggestion in this paper that Morden's latest show, *The Devil's Violin*, takes this concept a step further. If the style of storytelling that emerged in the 70s and 80s corresponded most closely to Thomson's model of presentation, then some storytellers have been moving increasingly towards a representational model with a

greater demonstration of character, greater use of physicality and even a hint of 'acting out' certain episodes. Stylistically *The Devil's Violin* moves as closely to the dividing wall as possible, as Morden seems to move effortlessly between the two modes.

In *The Language of Signs*, an essay from 2003, Morden describes the job of the storyteller as 'the one who could show us the truth beneath the illusion of the overfamiliar' (15) or 'to make the stone stony again' (6). To me that very much sounds like Brecht describing the role of the epic actor and the purpose of *Verfremdung*. In *The Devil's Violin* Morden seems to be his own storytelling Pyramus, peering through the chink in the wall at his Brechtian Thisbe.

*The Devil's Violin* begins informally, as is often the case with storytelling performances. Morden and the three musicians walk onto stage and acknowledge and greet the audience. In an essential act of 'befriending', they introduce themselves, perhaps even joke with the audience and explain the format of the show – namely, stories interspersed with music. The show begins with a tune.

Morden then begins the first story. Or rather he begins to introduce the stories and he does this through the telling of another story, a personal story of how he came across a book of Welsh Gypsy folktales collected by John Sampson from the Wood family in the first quarter of the last century, and how this collection has become the basis for the current show. (In fact, only two of the three stories that feature in the show are from the Wood Collection – the title story, 'The Devil's Violin' – is a Roma Gypsy story from Central Europe, as are the featured tunes.) At this point there is still a conversational quality to Morden's style, he is directly addressing the audience as himself, and it is not until this piece of metanarration ends and he launches into the

first story,  that his performance register moves up a gear. His voice becomes fuller, more paced, more rhythmic, and his body becomes stiller and more controlled. Furthermore, there is a shift in his persona from being 'Morden-about-to-be-the-Storyteller' to 'Morden the Storyteller'. Due to the careful preparation for this moment of shift, the earlier, less-performative Morden remains visible alongside (or perhaps slightly behind) the new 'Morden the Storyteller'.

And so the show progresses – three stories in all ('The Leaves that Hung but Never Grew', 'The Devil's Violin' and 'The King of the Herrings'), interspersed with and underpinned by music, with temporary reversions to the earlier informality in between each item to reinforce the relationship between performers and audience and to remind us of the performers' multi-dimensional personae. There is one interval, after the second story.

Having briefly described the format of *The Devil's Violin*, there is much that could be said about this piece of work, but I would like to briefly comment upon three aspects of the performance, before showing you an extract from a performance given at the Barbican Centre in London in October last year.

*Interaction of music and story*

During the course of the storytelling revival over the past thirty or more years, storytellers have regularly worked with musicians, especially traditional musicians, for a variety of reasons. At the same time storytellers have been equally happy to work without musicians – arrangements have generally been informal and there has been a separation between the storyteller and the musician, for the most part, within a performance. In other words, musicians have primarily provided musical interludes between the stories (or storytellers have provided narrative interludes between the

tunes) and there may be no connection specifically between the story and the music beyond the fact that they both emanate from the 'traditional' cannon.

What is notable about the use of music in *The Devil's Violin* is that it is employed both inside and outside the stories and is used to actively enhance and support the stories, rather than to simply complement them. Music serves four principal functions in the show:

1. *as punctuation between stories and within stories*. They provide a thematic link between the stories and mark the transition between stories. Within they stories, they also mark transitions between sections of the story, giving audiences time to reflect on the story and to re-ground the narrative through the means of a musical *Leitmotiv*.

2. *to underpin the narrative action* – for example, a horse galloping is underpinned by 'galloping' music, the cry of a bird is represented through a particular sound made on the violin. The rhythm of the music often drives the rhythm of the verbal delivery.

3. *as an emotional shortcut* – to identify, locate and enhance the emotion at a particular point in the story.

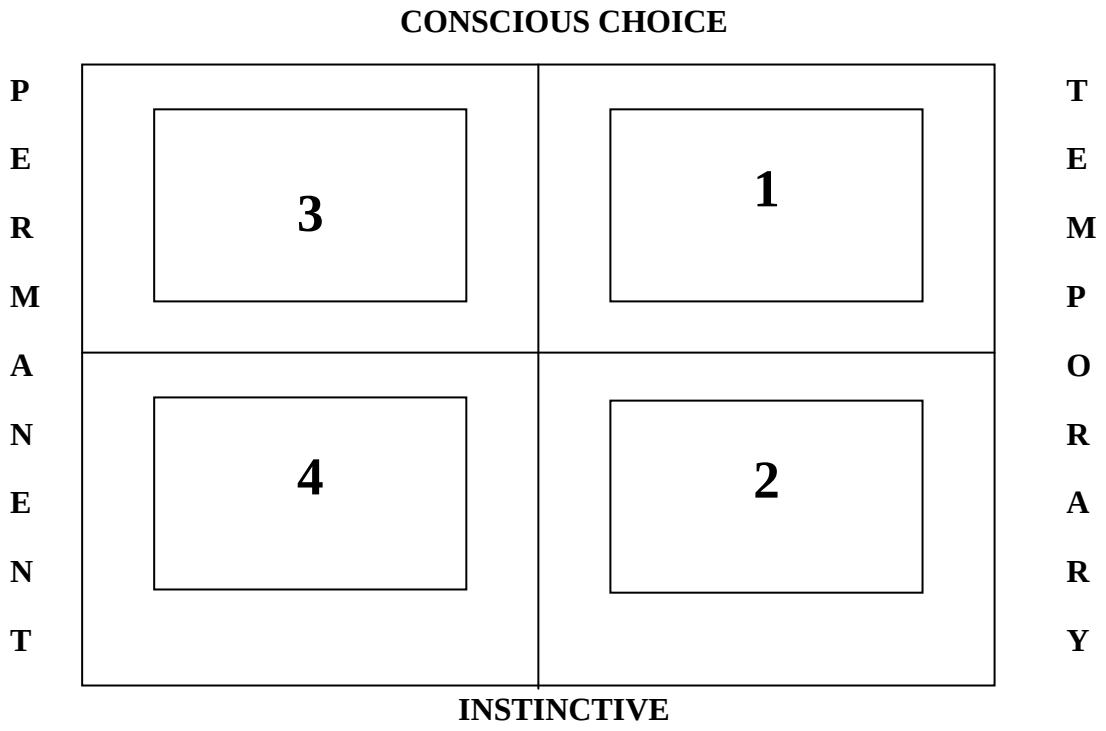
4. *as a cultural identifier or marker* – specifically the use of Central European Roma Gypsy music to locate the narrative material within that specific culture.

*Fluid/fixed text*

Time and again storytellers consistently mark out their art form as one that is characterised by the lack of fixed text, that storytelling is essentially an improvised form, the storyteller creating the text anew at each performance within a given narrative structure. Dublin-based actor and storyteller Jack Lynch likens storytelling to jazz in this respect. My own feeling is that there is probably less textual variation in storytelling than many storytellers would like to think.

Certainly, the storytelling texts may well be developed through improvisation and may even evolve somewhat during early performances, but before long, texts become increasingly fixed through repetition and the storyteller recognising, through performance, that some verbal formulations simply work better than others. In the context of ensemble telling (which is essentially what *The Devil's Violin* is – an ensemble of storyteller and musicians), the need for a fixed text becomes apparent to allow for the precision with which the spoken text is punctuated with music.

Nevertheless, what is important to recognise is that the storytelling text has the *potential* to change in performance, partly because of the improvisatory manner in which the text was created (there is less of a sense of fidelity to an original or *Urtext*) and partly because of the direct engagement between storyteller and audience. Daniel Morden insists that even in such a tightly structured show as *The Devil's Violin*, there is still significant variation between individual performances. It is likely, of course, that Morden is particularly sensitive to variation between performances, but this remains a show where variation does not appear to be a defining characteristic, any more than in any live performance. Yet, as subtle as the variations may seem, there does still remain a degree of fluidity in the text of the show, which may be characterised by the following model:




1. This includes a range of variations that might come and go from performance to performance, for example, the acting out of a galloping horse. These choices are taken consciously.

2. Variation that occurs, seemingly spontaneously, from performance to performance, often in response to specific contextual circumstances.

3. This represents evolutionary change in the text, the kind of change that is permanent and comes about, consciously, as part of the natural processes of being a reflective practitioner.

4. This also represents an evolutionary change that occurs as part of a subconscious process of development.

*Passing through the chink in Snout's Wall*

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, is the new performative territory that Morden occupies in *The Devil's Violin*. Where storytellers have been either presentational in their performance style (most common in the UK) or representational (far less common), Morden has found a way to begin moving seemingly effortlessly between the presentational and the representational, between speaking and doing, between being and acting, between telling and showing. At one moment he is 'Morden-about-to-be-the-Storyteller', the next he is 'Morden the Storyteller', and the next he is demonstrating character, all managed through subtle transitions.

When I first saw the show at Theatr Y Bont at the University of Glamorgan in September 2006, I was struck by Morden's remarkable stillness as a performer. His feet were rooted to the stage with such physical discipline that is rarely seen in storytellers, who are more likely to shift around and shuffle as one would do in everyday life. After the show, an audience member suggested to me that Morden would have benefited from working with a director. There were moments, it was felt, that Morden failed to completely enchant the audience through a slight shuffle of the feet, a flick of the hair or a scratch of the nose, or an everyday gesture just at the moment of enchantment, right at the point at which storyteller becomes shaman. I could see the point that was being made, but I read the performance very differently.

For me, Morden passes through the wall between presentation and representation and even goes as far as he can towards the moment of enchantment. But he has no intention of becoming the enchanter, for, as Brecht knew only too well, with enchantment can disappear the capacity for enlightenment. Just as we are about to lose ourselves and abandon our critical capacity, Morden draws us back, reminds us that he, like us, is only human. He is only the storyteller and even that is a temporary mask. Throughout the performance Morden never allows us to lose sight of himself – in epic terms, the audience simultaneously sees both the actor and character. And he is able to bring us back from the very edge of enchantment with a subtle gesture or change of attitude, precisely because of the physical discipline he exerts throughout the performance. What might appear to be a lack of concentration or discipline, is in fact a consciously made and sophisticated performance decision.

It is for these reasons that I believe *The Devil's Violin* represents a significant development in contemporary storytelling performance.

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